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Chapter 28

They Think I'm Stupid': Dealing with Supervisor Feedback

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reflects upon the author's personal experiences of dealing with supervisor feedback as she progressed through her doctoral studies. Feelings of inadequacy are addressed and advice is given on how to deal with this and move forward. Finally, practical hints and tips for dealing with supervisor feedback are provided.

In this chapter I share my experiences of dealing with supervisor feedback and offer some thoughts, ideas, hints and tips on how you can turn this sometimes negative experience into something positive and useful. Writing is a skilled craft and it still takes me time, patience and practice (especially practice) to produce work of reasonable quality, but then, we all have to start somewhere. I remember thinking 'What's the point in writing if I don't have anything to say?' However, I soon learnt that even if you don't think you have anything to say, write anyway. I found that once I begin writing I start thinking, creating, reflecting and critiquing, all of which ultimately contributes to and supports my writing. I have structured this chapter into three sections. The first reflects on my personal experiences of dealing with supervisor feedback at the beginning of my PhD studies. The second describes my experiences during the middle and latter stages of my doctoral research. Finally, I present the advice I would have liked to have had when I first embarked on my doctoral adventures in the hope that you find it of some help.

I'M NOT GOOD ENOUGH

My doctoral studies spanned six years and I had the added complication of being a part-time distance learner, working full-time in a different university. Six years prior to embarking on my PhD I had completed a Masters degree and considered myself to be reasonably articulate in respect of my writing skills. However, all that changed when I became a PhD student. I vividly remember the day I first received detailed written feedback from one of my supervisors. Even though the event was four years ago, I can still remember how utterly stupid and useless I felt. Furthermore, I was confused, because I had already received some encouraging feedback from my other supervisor. Luckily, I had a very close colleague in whom I could confide, so my first response was to call her up and tell her how I felt. She was also working full-time and studying part-time for her PhD, so I knew she would understand my situation. As a part-time student and researcher I found the support of colleagues, friends and fellow students was, and is, incredibly important. For me, the PhD road was long, often lonely and introspective and regularly all-consuming. The knowledge that someone else was going through the same trials and

tribulations was certainly a comfort and reassurance to me. The first piece of advice my colleague offered was to write down how I felt at that particular moment in time, and so I did.

Since the beginning of my studies I had kept a reflective research journal in which I recorded observations, feelings, reactions and experiences. These related both to the subject of my research, as well as to my own personal reflections. This extract from my journal captures my feelings and state of mind on receiving this feedback:

“Feeling rather fed up this evening. Received feedback on my managerialism chapter in the post today and although comments were very constructive it made it clear to me that I have such a long way to go. I am getting so tired, work is very demanding at the moment, yet I am aware of how much more time I need to spend on my research. It isn’t just time, it’s useful time. It really struck me that work produced for my PhD can’t be just good enough, it has to be much better than that, it has to make a difference and it has to matter. At the moment I feel as though it is all far beyond me and unachievable. I really hope this feeling passes soon as it is affecting my motivation and I am finding excuses as to why I shouldn’t just get on with it.”

Hopefully this extract will reassure you that, if you have been in this position, you are not alone. On the other hand, if you have not yet received feedback from your supervisor, it may help to prepare you for such an experience. The good news is, things will and do get better. It is all part of the steep learning curve synonymous with doctoral study. That journal entry was written towards the end of my first twelve months. Working full-time I found it incredibly difficult to juggle the demands of my job, PhD and family and I felt guilty that I was not devoting enough time to my doctoral studies. One of the things that struck me as I read through my supervisor’s comments was the realisation of what is actually required to produce a body of work suitable to be considered doctoral level and especially important for me, how (and how much) to write. I had previously sent short pieces to my supervisors, but their feedback had been sparse. In all honesty, this was probably because I hadn’t actually written enough for them to comment upon.

A few weeks after receiving this feedback I attended a conference where my supervisor was chairing a session. It was difficult, but I told him how I had felt when I received his responses and I was surprised at his reaction – in a good way. He seemed genuinely concerned that I had been so upset by his comments and explained that whilst my work was good, his aim was to help me make it even better. I was very appreciative of this and it helped me get things into perspective. He also told me I needed to write more, but as I have already intimated, I was already aware of that. Talking to my supervisor was really beneficial and I strongly recommend you do this, but maybe after a few days when you have given yourself time to fully digest their feedback and become a bit more objective. You might like to know that he has also told me he has tried to recognise this in the way he gives feedback, although his students still say his comments don’t pull any punches!

When I reached the enviable final stage of writing up my thesis, I looked back on my journal entry and it seemed as though I was reading about someone else. It was only

with the benefit of hindsight that I could see how far I had progressed. I felt as though I wanted to reach out to my earlier self and tell her everything would be all right in the end. The successful completion of my PhD is testament that it was. As my studies (and writing) progressed, I became more accustomed to receiving critical feedback and as a result was much better prepared. I also got to know my supervisors' own particular styles, likes, dislikes and expectations. This helped me develop a much clearer sense of what they thought I was capable of achieving. However, this was not always compatible with my own estimations of my capability. I have to admit it was not until I had written the first full draft of my thesis that I began to realise the extent to which my writing had improved. Had it not been for the frank, comprehensive and critical feedback received from my supervisors at the outset, and throughout my PhD studies, I do not believe this would have been the case. So, I suppose what I am saying is, it hurts like hell at the time, but it really is worth the pain!

ACTUALLY, I'M OK

By the time I was two to three years into my PhD I was receiving supervisor feedback on a more regular basis. I am also pleased to say I was writing more, but not necessarily as often as I would have liked. By this stage I had developed a strong relationship and bond with both my supervisors and in some cases I was able to anticipate their feedback. With this in mind I would often include my own notes and comments in my drafts to show them my thought patterns and plans for how I thought the writing of my chapters should progress. This process worked very well for me and it also made it much easier to respond to their feedback. The following are some journal extracts written when I was working on a peer-reviewed journal article on which my supervisors' were second and third authors:

"Feedback received from first supervisor and main comments were that I needed to inject a more nuanced picture into my narrative. But overall, she felt it was a rich and interesting discussion. Obviously, feeling more anxious about second supervisor's comments."

A day later I received feedback from my second supervisor:

"Feedback received from second supervisor and the paper, together with both sets of comments, is pasted in my journal. Second supervisor wanted me to include more quotes/comments that I've observed and beef up the conclusion considerably."

What I find interesting to note in these journal extracts (as opposed to my earlier example) is that the focus is on summarising what I need to do, rather than how I was feeling. Nevertheless, the first extract above does reveal I was more apprehensive waiting for my second supervisor's comments.

Within the paper were numerous comments, suggestions, amendments, additions and deletions from both supervisors, but by now I was much better equipped to deal with and respond to them. I did this by systematically working through each point, making the

necessary modifications and detailing my response in writing for my supervisors. I realised as I was doing this I was honing skills that would be needed to respond to other academic peer reviewers outside of the comfort zone of my own supervisors.

Ultimately, the paper we were working on was accepted for publication and this was a high point in my doctoral studies. As first author I had to respond to the journal editor's comments and I drew heavily on my experiences of responding to my own supervisors' feedback:

“Worked hard on getting the amendments done (with advice from my first and second supervisors). It was time-consuming, but a very worthwhile exercise and it was a learning curve for me as it was the first time I have written back to an editor with my responses. For my sake (as well as the Journal's), I sent back one draft with all amendments, another showing all the track changes and a separate document detailing all our responses to the copy editor's comments. I am really excited about seeing my first publication in print and it is a vindication that my PhD is worth doing.”

The last eight months of my doctorate were spent analysing my data, revisiting, reviewing and updating earlier chapters and writing up later chapters and my introduction. By this stage I had begun to think of myself as a competent writer and this really struck home when I received feedback from my supervisors on my updated literature review chapters. In contrast to comments on my earlier work, they really didn't have much to say. My first supervisor responded only by email, pointing out a few typos, but was happy with the content and quality of my work. My second supervisor (the scary one) only made seven comments and most of these were for clarification. For the first time I didn't need to make any substantial changes or amendments in response to their feedback. I felt really good when my second supervisor told me in person that when he read my updated literature review chapters he could see that 'I had got it'. This gave me confidence and a real spur to get on with writing up the rest of the damn thing!

By the time I was in a position to send the first full draft of my thesis to my supervisors I was apprehensive about their feedback, but I was also incredibly relieved that this day had finally come. Furthermore, because I had been sending them written work throughout the whole process, they had already seen and commented on much of it. I can't stress enough how important it has been to send work to my supervisors for feedback and comment, and as I said at the start of this chapter, I have done this from the beginning. However, every supervisor/supervisee relationship is different and unique and learning how to manage your supervisors and nurture your relationship with them are other skills you need to develop. I consider myself very fortunate to have had the supervisory team I did, but this relationship is two-way and I was always ready to take their advice and act upon it.

After submitting my first full draft I was genuinely surprised by how quickly my supervisors came back to me, although I realise this may not be the case for all doctoral students. Nevertheless, I do recommend asking your supervisors how long you can expect to wait for feedback on written work. On this particular occasion, I can honestly say I was pleasantly surprised by their feedback. Yes, I still had work to do, amendments, additions

and corrections to make, but their positive comments really gave me a lift. However, because this time the comments were few, and not in as much detail as I had been used to previously, I had several questions for my supervisors. I was now not afraid to ask for clarity or challenge my supervisors on the feedback they gave me. As I have mentioned previously, talking to them about my concerns, feelings and any difficulties I was having was essential. This is based on honesty, trust and respect for each other.

I responded to my supervisors by email, carefully going through each of their points one by one, explaining my rationale and asking for more information and clarity on the comments I was unsure of how to address. I also followed this up with telephone and Skype conversations so I was absolutely clear about what it was my supervisors felt I needed to do. That was in July 2016 and I spent the summer (in between holidays and work) making the necessary amendments and adjustments to my thesis. By early September my amended full draft was sent to my supervisors.

The next few days I waited with bated breath. I was due to see my second supervisor at a conference the following week and I knew he would want to discuss my latest attempt. He was full of smiles when I saw him and he said, 'Have you read my email?' I hadn't, and for a split second I had a feeling of dread. This soon passed when he told me 'Well, in my view it's ready to submit.' I felt euphoric, six years' work and I was nearly there! If you had told me I would be in this situation even one year ago I would have had difficulty believing it. Every doctoral student experience is unique, but for me, much of my thesis came together in the final six months. This was a culmination of previous years of work on my part, combined with the unstinting support, guidance and constructive criticism of my supervisors. I could not have done it without them and for that I will be eternally grateful. But, and there is always a 'but', it is *my* thesis and *I* had to do the work. This included sending regular drafts to my supervisors, accepting their feedback in the spirit in which it was offered and acting on their advice. I always asked if I didn't understand as I knew they were doing it to help me improve and enable me to make my work even better.

HINTS AND TIPS FOR DEALING WITH SUPERVISOR FEEDBACK

In this final section I present a list of Dos and Don'ts, based on my experiences. I have listed the Don'ts first, as from my perspective these were some of the feelings I experienced when first receiving supervisor feedback. From talking to other doctoral students, I now realise such feelings and reactions are normal, but it doesn't have to be that way.

Don't:

- Take feedback personally, even though it is intensely personal to you. Your thesis is your creation and it is a natural reaction to defend your work. Indeed, being able to defend your work is an important skill to develop.
- Ignore or dismiss supervisor feedback. Their comments are intended to help you and enable you to develop and improve as a researcher and writer.

- Use feedback as an excuse not to write. Use feedback to beat yourself up, or to think you are stupid, or not good enough. *You are not stupid and you are good enough*, but you have to learn how to do it.

Do:

- Write down, or audio/video record how you feel and why you feel this way. This can really help to consolidate and make sense of the situation and the feedback.
- Talk to someone unconnected with your thesis. This could be a fellow student, colleague, friend or family member. They will not be emotionally attached to your thesis in the way that you are.
- Sleep on it. Give yourself time to digest the feedback and go back to it a few days later. Make notes on the comments from your supervisor(s) and how you can address them.
- Arrange a meeting with your supervisor(s). Talk to them about their comments and your reactions to their feedback. Ask questions to clarify exactly what they mean and what you need to do.
- (Once you are clear about what you need to do to improve your work) systematically work through each comment and make the necessary amendments. Make a note of the amendments you have made.
- Keep earlier versions of your work, clearly labelled by date and version.
- Agree a timescale with your supervisor(s) for submission of your written work and stick to it.
- Write every day if you can – little and often soon mounts up. Some supervisors like to see small chunks of work on a regular basis, whilst others prefer complete chapters. Set the ground rules with your supervisor so you both know what is expected.
- After a period of time go back and reflect on your initial thoughts and feelings. With the benefit of hindsight you will recognise how you have developed as a researcher.